

The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education

—The Emphasis on Play in Early Childhood Education Curricula in Japan—

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Introduction

The importance of play in early childhood education is widely recognized today. However, the understanding and practice method of play vary among educators, and it is a much-debated issue. Often educators have different views regarding the balance between 'free activities' that allow children to exercise initiatives, independence, and freedom, and 'guidance/intervention' that are often provided in order to achieve certain goals, and the way activities and guidance are practiced also differs depending upon an educator.

In Japan, the Kindergarten Education Guidelines (the Course of Study for Kindergarten) were revised in 1998. The new Guidelines specified the importance of "a well-planned environment" ("establishing a well-planned classroom layout and organization"), and "role of teacher" in promoting independent activities by children. In the previous revision of the 1987 Guidelines, there was a shift of emphasis in the curriculum, from 'instruction-oriented'/'teacher-centered' with which instructors/teachers select activities for children, to 'children-centered', with which children chose their own activities.

In the 1987 revision, emphasis was placed on giving children the freedom in choosing their own activities and the ways the activities are carried out, and traditionally used words such as "instruction/guidance" were replaced with the word "assistance." As a result, many educators started limiting their intervention to as less as possible. In the newly revised 1998 Guidelines, a

new section specifying the 'role of the teacher' was added.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the 'status of play' in early childhood education in Japan and appropriate guidance/intervention as part of the study to improve the quality of child and infant education. I would like to look at the past Japanese regulations and guidelines for early childhood education with a focus on free activities and study the background to today's status of play and guidance/intervention in Japanese early childhood education. I would also like to compare the Japanese early childhood education with that of England where a style of letting children choose most of their activities has been practiced for many years now.

Shift of emphasis in early childhood education in Japan to free activities / play

The Educational Acts and other regulations issued by the Ministry of Education and Science in Japan have become the base for the early childhood education since 1899 (Meiji era). As for early childhood education curricula, the Ministry has set Kindergarten Education Guidelines which are the national standards for kindergarten curricula.

Now, I would like to look at the past Japanese kindergarten guidelines in order to study how the status of free activities have changed in kindergarten education curricula. The guidelines for kindergarten education also have become the base for today's day nursery education.

Foundation of the first kindergarten

The first kindergarten in Japan was attached to Tokyo Women's Normal School. It was founded in 1876 (in the

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ninth year of the Meiji era), 36 years after Friedrich Froebel opened a kindergarten in Germany. The first head teacher of the kindergarten in Japan was a German lady, Clara Matsuno who had had studied Froebel's philosophy in Germany.

When the first kindergarten was founded in Japan, the theory by Froebel became the base for the nursery education. Froebel's theory emphasized the importance of play. Despite the emphasis, however, activities actually carried out focused on a play called Froebel's gifts. In fact, teachers tended to instruct children about how to play the Froebel's gifts. As a result, all the children in the class uniformly played the gifts. In 1876, activities in the kindergarten in a day were as follows (Ministry of Education,1979,p.56):

Going to kindergarten → Lining-up → Singing → Talks
→ Outdoor play → Lining-up → Playing Froebel's gifts →
Play → Lunch → Outdoor play → Playing Froebel's gifts
→ Going home

In this daily plan, words such as "Outdoor play" and "Play" are used. "Outdoor play" seems to imply free activities, and "Play" seems to imply a group-play with singing songs. In those days the "play" meant playing together with the children from the same class.

The school regulation for the kindergarten attached to Tokyo Women's Normal School was established in 1877. According to the regulation, early childhood education contents mainly consisted of the following three subjects, (1) Materials (2) Art, (3) Knowledge. It seems that teacher directed / instructed each subject at that time, and each day had 4 classes of approximately 30 minutes each (Ministry of Education,1979,p.57).

The kindergarten education in Japan was started based on the Froebel's theory that centered on play. However, not much consideration was given to free activities / free play in Japan.

The reason why free activities/play was given less consideration seems to be because kindergarten education was influenced largely by the elementary school education. The elementary school education system in Japan was founded based on the European and the US school systems. Also, as regarding the

curriculum contents, the Japanese borrowed the timetable of the secondary school in France to be used as the Japanese elementary school curriculum, and not much consideration was given to the playtime in between classes (Sakamoto,1967,p.11).

In the elementary school at the time of the foundation, playtime was allocated in between classes, and play does not seem to have been regarded as an activity to be carried out during classes. It was the case for the kindergarten too, due to the influence from the elementary school curriculum.

The Ministry of Education issued "Content and Facilities of Kindergarten Education Act" in 1899, and it was the first regulation for kindergartens. The Act outlined four education subjects:

- (1) Play
- (2) Singing songs
- (3) Dialogue
- (4) Craft

The word "play" was mentioned by the Ministry of Education in the first regulation for kindergarten education in Japan. There, "play" implied both "free play" and "group play". "Free play" means that children played freely outdoors. "Group play" means that all the members of the class engaged in activities together with music and song, to music. Therefore, what is called "Free play" is equal to what we call free activities/ free play today (Ministry of Education,1979,p.137).

In Japan, the Ministry of Education used the word 'play' in the first regulation for the kindergarten education. However, the word 'play' did not really mean free activities, but instructed activities.

Children played the Froebel's gifts together, dancing to music, playing games using hands, and so on directed by educators. The kindergarten education, which centered on guided activities, influenced early childhood education that was started later on.

The new education movement and the free play

Introduction of "the new education / the liberal

education movement" in Europe and the United States was gradually started in Japan from the 1890s. Particularly during the Taisho era (1912-1926), the ideas of liberal education in schools and kindergartens were developed under the Western influence.

Under the Western influence, teachers got to turn the eyes of the criticism to the way of instructor-oriented education. Teachers began to place more importance on children's view points and interests. Under the ideas of liberal education theory, teachers in schools and kindergartens tried to bring up children's self-activities through playing and experiences in children's life.

Many teachers tried to take the new educational method, which were based on ideas of 'child-centered' and the 'child's experience in life' which was caused in the Europe and United States of America, for instance, the free education, project method, Montessori teaching method and so on.

The education method of J.Dewey entered into the kindergarten education as the project method, which W. Kilpatrick developed. The project method curriculum based on the child's experience in life. The practices of Goroku Nakamura and Minoru Wada based on play. They focused on children's interest. After that, Sozo Kurahashi developed their theory.

In 1926, the Kindergarten Act was issued by the Ministry of education. The content of education was decided five items as follow,

- (1) play,
- (2) song,
- (3) observation,
- (4) dialogue,
- (5) handicrafts, and so on.

The word, "and so on" was added to the end of the early educational contents. With this, kindergarten education became quite free actually. And educators could develop freely their own way.

In kindergartens at this time, we could find many free activities, which based on children's interest, for instance, the rhythm play, the spontaneous group activities, the crayon picture, drama's playing, the role

play, the cooperation handicrafts, the infant song, the kindergarten excursion, the observation of the worms, insects, animals and plants, the large-sized building block, the jungle gym and the slide and so on was done.

Sozo Kurahashi who had a big influence on the early childhood education before and after the war. He was professor at Tokyo Women's Higher Normal School and also a principal of kindergarten attached to the School.

Here was his famous episode that he put Froebel's gifts into one basket and let children use them freely. He was against the fixed way of using of Froebel's gifts. He explained that this was not what should be called innovation, but it was simply a natural attempt to make a kindergarten how it should be (Thumori, 1979 p.21).

In 1934, he and his staff practiced "guidance by induction in education theory". Kurahashi's theory was as follows (Kurahashi, 1965, p.57).

Self-satisfaction → Guiding self-satisfaction → Guidance through induction → Guidance by teaching.

His education theory attempts to propose a way to improve the quality of free activities/ play based on the interest of the children.

His Guidance theory presupposes "enough facilities" in a "free atmosphere" where children are absorbed in play and feel satisfied. Educator could recognize whether a child is satisfied or not and if not, guide the child to make him/her feel satisfied.. This step of guidance was called "the guidance of self-satisfaction".

Next step of guidance is preplanned for children who cannot achieve self-satisfaction. It is "Guidance by Induction" (Kurahashi, 1965, p.45). A teacher uses a theme to organize the children's fragmentary activities. He considered that children's activities would become more extensive by being provided with a theme chosen according to the interest of the children. His staff at kindergarten practiced the thematic play, such as, "transportation", "aquarium" and so on.

And last step is actual teaching, so called "Guidance by Teaching" that is the last step of guidance (This step will be main in school.). For example, if "an aquarium" was

prepared in the classroom, children would like to make fish. "An aquarium" in the room will stimulate and guide the children's interest and the life which children have. It is an induction by educator. When the children asked, "What are those other fish that are there in the tank?" to the teacher, after making various fish, the teacher may teach the names of the other fish. It is called "Guidance by Teaching" (Kurahashi,1965,p.47).

As for the Kurahashi's education theory, even if the educator prepared the creation of the aquarium in the classroom, all the children in the class do not need to be engaged in one theme. Children can choose different types of play. Of course, it is good even if children play at yard. However, for the children who cannot find anything to play with in the kindergarten, an aquarium is presented in a classroom, and it will induce the interest of the children.

Kurahashi's education theory never required all the children in a class to play under one theme. However, a part of his theory was misunderstood. In those days, the teacher-centred education was the dominant style of education in Japan. The thematic play which Kurahashi set in curriculum, wasn't treated as free activities, but it was handled uniformly as one activity which completed all together by one theme.

This theory looks like "the project work" which practiced at school in England. In 1935, Kurahashi published the book "The Practice of the Systematical Nursery Education Plan". He wrote his idea that "early childhood education starts with the lives of infants and arrives back to life (the true meaning of life)". However, in the first half of Showa, it became gradually kindergarten education with dark wartime color.

A new starting point of education after the war and free play

After the war, the School Education Law (1947) was established. The kindergarten gets a new start as the one of school system. The purpose of kindergarten was specified providing a suitable environment for physical and mental development (the School Education Law, Article 77). This purpose is the same at present, too.

The Ministry of Education published 'The Standard of Early Childhood Education-A Guide to Early Childhood Education-' in 1948. This was a guideline for nursery education and was not a national/state standard. Ms. H.Heffernan in CIE in the United States of American Army headquarters made efforts toward the making of 'The Standard of Early Childhood Education'. In Japan, Sakamoto,Hikotaro and Kurahasi,Sozo joined in the making of it.

As for the early childhood education contents, 12 experiences were shown by the activities as "the delightful experience for early childhood". They are

- (1) school excursion,
- (2) rhythm,
- (3) rest,
- (4) free play,
- (5) music,
- (6) story,
- (7) drawing,
- (8) handicraft ,
- (9) observation of nature,
- (10)role playing, drama play, puppet theater,
- (11)health education and
- (12)annual events.

Because the activities of these 12 experiences were written to be parallel, "free play" can look like one in the various activities. However, when I read the description about "A day of the kindergarten" of the Standard of Early Childhood Education (1948), I could find "free play" is not the rest during the activities. Now, free play becomes the core of the children's activities all of a sudden (Sakamoto,1967,p.6).

The way of the description had the contradiction, but it was the first guideline, which admitted the importance of the play of free choice. According to the Standard of Early Childhood Education(1948), it is prescribed that "free play" meant the children's free choice of activities, such as music, story, rhythm, observation, picture, clay, paper workmanship and so on, at the time of when children came to school and finished a health check/inspection in the morning. It is prescribed that it is sometimes good to play together for about 20

minutes, too.

It is also prescribed that free play consists of the choice of child itself as much as possible according to the interest and the ability of each child, not getting children together one room and playing uniformly the same thing.

It isn't good to decide daily works, or making a timetable dividing the time of the specific works and the activities, because the life of the children at the kindergarten makes "free activities/free play" mainly. It is desirable that the child can be active and happy as children enjoy freely according to their natural instinct, throughout a day at the kindergarten.

Then, while children are playing, the teacher pays attention to each child and gives necessary suggestion and appropriate guidance. A teacher must promote children's physical, intellectual, emotional, social development.

In Japan, the word and the concept of "free playing" were first written down to 'The Standard of Early Childhood Education-A Guide to Early Childhood Education-' in 1948, and "free playing" occupied the central greater part of kindergarten education suddenly.

The systematic and organized curriculum and free activities

In 1956, the Ministry of Education as the state standard published Kindergarten Education Guidelines. The six areas were shown as the education contents at the kindergarten.

- (1) health
- (2) society
- (3) nature
- (4) language
- (5) music and rhythm
- (6) art and craft

Kindergarten contents were divided into six areas according to the aspects of aims of child activities, which are to be experienced at the infant stage. Ministry of Education tried to systematize and organize the

kindergarten education contents. From this time, Kindergarten education changed going toward "curriculum-oriented" like that of elementary education.

According to the Kindergarten Education Guideline (1956), the daily plan must make a balance between the time of the free play/ free activities and the time for the whole class activity. But, here, "the free play/ free activities " and "the class activity" were oppositely treated as the contrast again.

In 1964, Kindergarten Education Guidelines was revised, but the basic composition was the same as before. After revision, the form of infant activities in the kindergarten was devised as follow.

- (1) "the experience and the activity to be chosen by each infant / individual activity"
- (2) "the experience and the activity to do in the group / group activity",
- (3) and "the experience and the activity to do in the whole class / whole class activity".

Kindergarten Education Guidelines (1964) prescribed the guide of free activities as follows. "Guide of the individual activity must make the child's interest and desire be satisfied sufficiently. Whilst teacher participates in children's activities depending on the necessity and help them, in order to make the experience and the activity develop effectively. The guide of individual activity depends on children's necessity. According to the Kindergarten Education Guideline (1964), we could understand that the whole class activity was esteemed more than the individual activity.

Even if the children play a role-playing, such as 'shops' or 'transportation', they work together as a whole class . It seemed that sharing their role in whole class was useful for children.

In the 1964 revision, the Education Ministry paid consideration to the word, 'free play'. 'Free play' tended to be used in contrast of the word, the whole class teaching simultaneously. Here, instead of the word of the free play, "the activity to choose infant personally and to do it (the self choice activity)" was used.

However, when teachers organize the curriculum, they chose desirable experiences and activities, and they arranged them according to the six areas of education contents.

Since the idea of "curriculum-oriented" was adopted in 1956, sometimes, 'areas' for kindergarten were confused with 'subjects' for elementary school. And teacher-centered education was practiced again in nursery education. The kindergarten education became "curriculum-oriented" like that of elementary education.

Shift of paradigm to choosing own activities/play

In 1989, Kindergarten Education Guidelines were revised. Areas of emphasis were reduced from 6 areas to 5 areas.

- (1) Health
- (2) Human relationships
- (3) Environment
- (4) Language
- (5) Expression

There was a major shift of focus with the 1989 Guidelines to children's development, and the emphasis areas in the Guidelines were determined based on aspects that were desirable to be fostered in children. In addition, an expression such as "the teacher selects experiences and activities desirable to children and lays them out" was eliminated and instead, emphasis was placed on activities with which children can exercise their initiative. Importance was also placed on each individual child's life and play style.

Furthermore, the number of the words "instruct/guide/lead" used in the 1989 Guidelines was dramatically reduced from 74 to 14, and instead, the word "assist" was used many times. As a result, the Guidelines were generally misunderstood as recommending to provide as less guidance/intervention as possible while children are engaged in free activities. This led to the confusion of giving freedom and letting children do whatever they like.

The revised version of 1998 had the same fundamental principle, however, in order to improve the confused

situation of "giving freedom" and "letting alone", establishment of a well-planned classroom layout and organization, and role of teachers were added (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.23). This revision reflects the recognition of the importance of teachers' efforts, instead of providing supervision only, to improve the quality of children's play through establishment of an appropriate environment and providing appropriate guidance.

Conclusion

Since revision of the Kindergarten Education Guidelines in 1989, the importance of "free activities"/play was recognized in the Japanese nursery education. It allows children to exercise their initiative and spontaneous through play. However at the same time, there are yet many problems to be solved, such as how to improve the quality of free activities and how to guide children through play.

In this paper, I studied the change of the status of free activities/play in early childhood curriculum by following the history of Japanese early childhood education. Some problems became clear. Regarding the method of studying, I looked over the past Japanese Kindergarten education guidelines, which were the national/state standards for kindergarten curricula.

In Japan, the Ministry of Education recognized the importance of play and used the word 'play' in the first regulation for the kindergarten education. However, the word 'play' used in the first regulation did not mean free activities, but it was guided activities. Whole class activities (teacher-centered) were the center of nursery education. Free play was not valued as a class activity.

Since 1990s, free activities were placed at the center of the early childhood education curricula in Japan, and the Ministry of Education itself, too, admits that there is still no consistency in guidances provided by teachers for free activities.

The next task after this study is to analyze the issue of guidance for free activities. Therefore, as my next step, I would like to compare the Japanese early childhood education system with the nursery education system in England where free activities are the center of the

curriculum, as an effort to find a solution to the issue and clarify teacher's role.

Acknowledgments; Lastly I made this study inspired by the lecture by Hikotaro Sakamoto held in Otsu-city in 1967, under the title, "The history of 'free play' in Japan". I thank Mieko Iwami who has provided me with the information including outlines of lecture record.

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